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ABSTRACT

Dialogue journals are notebooks in which students write to their teacher, in English, about whatever they choose, to which the teacher responds without correcting any errors. The objective is a written conversation. One Los Angeles sixth grade teacher used the technique with a linguistically diverse class consisting of 27 students from 12 countries and 10 different language backgrounds, of whom only 2 were native English speakers using English at home. The dialogue journals students wrote were used for daily student-teacher conversations, and have become the core of the teacher's teaching, increasing individual student contact and providing spontaneous interaction using the dialogue journal has advantages for both students and teachers. Advantages to students include the opportunity for real communication and, consequently, language acquisition. Learning grows directly from students' individual interests and concerns. Advantages to the teacher include the opportunity to assess each student's language competence immediately and build from that point instead of starting at some predetermined level of instruction. Also, the teacher has the opportunity to learn a great deal about each student's language, culture, and customs. (MSE)

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WHY NOT REALLY COMMUNICATE?
IN DIALOGUE JOURNALS

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How can we make language learning real and interactive?

How can we spend enough time with our students to learn what their interests and needs are?

How can we know what our students' goals are in learning a second language, and then help them to reach those goals, when the goals can be as numerous as the members of the class?

How can we make course content relevant to a diverse group of students?

How can we begin 'where the students are' and help them to move along at their own pace?

How can we help weaker students without holding up the whole class?

In short, how is it possible to create a learner-centered environment for language learning--one in which students learn

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language by using language for real communication, when this communication is carried on within the four walls of a classroom for 5 to 10 hours a week? These questions crop up again and again among ESL teachers. This paper will explain what 'dialogue journals' are and tell how their use in the ESL classroom can provide at least a partial solution to these questions. A classroom in which dialogue journals are currently being used effectively will be described, and then the benefits of using dialogue journals to both the ESL teacher and students will be discussed.[1]

Dialogue journals are bound notebooks in which students write to their teacher (in English, of course) about whatever they choose, and the teacher writes back to each student--asking and answering their questions and making comments, but not correcting. In short, the student and teacher participate in a written 'conversation.'

Mrs. Reed, a sixth grade teacher in Los Angeles, California, has been using dialogue journals for 18 years. In the past few years, almost all of her students have been non-native speakers of English. Their school is bordered by three cultural communities --Armenian, Korean and Hispanic. In the student body of 1300, 30 different languages are spoken---60% of the students speak Spanish, 15% Korean, 15% Armenian, and 10% one of the remaining languages. Schools with this cultural and language diversity make up about 15% of the schools in Los Angeles. Mrs. Reed's 1980-81 class, whose writing will be presented and discussed here, consisted of 27 students from 12 different countries and 10 different language backgrounds. Only two of the students were native English speakers and spoke English at home. The amount of time the students had spent in English-speaking schools in the United States ranged from no time (a couple of students entered her class just weeks or months

[1]The reader interested in ideas for getting started with dialogue journals should consult J. Staton and L. Reed, Dialogue Journals: A Common Sense Approach to Communication. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics. In press.

after arriving in Los Angeles) to six years (all of their years in school had been in the United States). One of the students, who knew no English when he entered her class, was not literate in his native language.

Mrs. Reed's students write in dialogue journals every day and she writes back to each student each night. Most students pick up their journals when they arrive at school in the morning and keep them all day, writing when they have completed an assignment, during breaks, before or after school. This means that Mrs. Reed has a private conversation with each student, each day of the school year. The following interaction gives an idea of what the journal writing is like. This entry is taken from the sixth month of Bao's[2] journal. Bao is a Burmese student who had been in the United States for only a few months before he entered Mrs. Reed's classroom.

Feb. 10, 1981

S[3] Mrs. Reed I know what is the valentine but I don't know what I have to do and the valentine is we have to give the cards to someone and I have to buy the cards but I can't buy the cards that is the problems. I think I'm not going to the sofeball becuse I did not do nothing about it and Ricardo said I could be the catcher and he break his primise.

T No problem! Anyone who wants to give Valentines can. If you don't want to give Valentines you don't have to.
Talk to Ricardo again! I'm sure he forgot his promise when others on the team began yelling at him.
Did you ever find your pen?

Dialogue journals have become the kernel of Mrs. Reed's teaching.[4] They not only increase her contact time with the students,

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[2]All student and teacher names (except Mrs. Reed's) are pseudonyms.

[3]S = Student; T = Teacher. Spelling and grammar have not been corrected.

[4]Mrs. Reed's comments cited in this paper come from an interview with her by Jana Staton, September, 1981.

but provide an atmosphere for genuine and spontaneous interaction, in which a great deal of learning takes place. She and her students participate mutually in the learning process, and she is able to monitor student progress daily and promote learning through her part in the interaction.

Mrs. Reed's teaching situation is probably different, in many ways, from that of most people who will read this paper. Her students are adolescents. They stay in her classroom almost all day. They write to her every day. They are not only learning language, but they are also growing up. But some general applications of the benefits of dialogue journals can be made to any ESL situation, leaving the details of set-up and maintenance to individual teachers. First, student benefits will be discussed, and then teacher benefits.

Dialogue journals provide the opportunity for real communication

> Many researchers now view native language learning and second language learning as analogous processes characterized by the development of rule-governed creativity. The learner is thought to engage actively, albeit unconsciously, in the gradual discovery of the rule system underlying the language to which he is exposed. Although the young child acquiring his native language and the second language learner may go about the task in somewhat different ways, the developmental pattern of each is now thought to be both systematic and predictable. (Tucker & d'Anglejan, p. 66)

Research has shown that children learning their first language discover the rule system of a language in the process of communication. While there is certainly not time for ESL teachers to communicate orally with each student individually each day, and while only a certain amount of class time can be devoted to student-with-student free communication, dialogue journals make daily communicative interaction possible.

Cazden (1979) and others (McNamee, 1979; Wertsch, 1980; Snow and Goldfield, 1982) have written about the importance of 'interac-

tional scaffolding' in first language acquisition—the caretaker or language model acts as a 'step' for the learner's utterances.

Bao's journal provides many examples of interactional scaffolding:

S Yesturday I go magic mountain and my big brother play the game and we wins the game and we got the dolls.

T Did you ride the big rides at Magic Mountain? They look like they are very scary.

S I didn't ride the ride the big ride becuse the big ride is go so fast so I'm scare and I didn't ride the big ride but we win something else is my big brother play the game and he wins 4 of the dolls one is walrus, an a dog and two giraffe and my Ucale play the game he wins one dinesore so we got all of them is 5 of them.

Bao starts by writing about his trip to Magic Mountain. Mrs. Reed provides support by asking for more information about the trip, and then Bao makes use of some of her language to write his answer. Her phrase 'ride the big ride' has been helpful to him, but notice that he doesn't stay with that phrase alone, but goes on to write about 'playing the game' also. He uses her writing as a step on which he can build his own.

In the process of communicative, supportive interaction, students learn language on many different levels at once. The following examples, from Bao's journal, show that while he is concentrating on other things, he is learning vocabulary, syntactic structures, and language functions of English.

1. Vocabulary acquisition

S You know today I told you can we help the lunch and you said you have to ask your math teacher...and Mrs. ___ said if you want to help you may help the luch...and I said... I don't know how to do math and I tell the luch checking I can't help the luch...

T That is good thinking! Don't miss your math class if you are having any trouble understanding the math. When the math is easy and you understand then you can miss the math class and help in the lunch shack.

S I know I'm not going to miss my math anymore if the math is hard and I don't understand so I don't go...if I understanding so I could go help. If I miss the lunch sheak so I don't care becuse every day I could go...is that right.

T Good! You understand very well about the best times to go help in the lunch shack.

S Yes I understand very well about the best times to go help in the lunch shack.

Mrs. Reed and Bao have discussed and resolved the question of working in the lunch shack, and in the process, Bao has learned the vocabulary.

2. Syntactic structures

T Did you enjoy talking to Jana? You were very nice to fix the tea for us. Thank you.

S Yes! I like to talk to the Mrs. Jana. I'm very nice for fixing the tea for you and Mrs. Jana.

Again, Mrs. Reed's entry serves as a step for Bao's, and notice that he did not use the exact words she did, but correctly used a gerund instead of her infinitive. Of course, copying, or partially copying, the teacher's writing does not mean that a structure has been learned. But since samples of student writing are available to the teacher all year long, she can observe the process of acquisition of grammatical structures. For example, Bao's questions at the beginning of the year show that he does not yet know how to use 'do' support in questions:

- How many have you daughter?

- Where are you came from?
- Where are you lives?

In February he is writing the following questions:

- What did you mean about the valentines...?
- Did we have to made the valentines for our classroom?
- Did you like my idea?

Mrs. Reed can see that Bao has not completely learned the use of 'do' support in questions, but that he has made a lot of progress toward mastery.

3. Language functions

Since dialogue journal writing closely resembles oral, face-to-face conversation, many language functions, or 'speech acts' are performed. Searle (1979) suggested five categories of speech acts: directives (including requests for information and imperatives), commissives (i.e., promises), expressives (expression of attitudes and feelings), assertives (stating what you believe to be the case) and declarations (changing the state of affairs; i.e., 'I resign.'). Shuy (1982) showed how speech act theory could be utilized in the analysis of language functions ('using language to get things done') in dialogue journal writing. One of the language functions that Shuy found to be important was requests--requests for information and requests for opinions. By looking at Bao's requests for information and opinions across the year, we see that he learns many different ways, both direct and indirect, of making such requests.

Sept. - What are we learning.
(direct request)

Jan. - Miss P___ is going to come at next week. I think we are going to read the more book are we?
(give information and make direct request, in the form of a tag question)

Feb. - I know what is the valentine but I don't know what I have to do...

(indirect request - states his need for information)

March - How come we sell the peanuts and if we win you got to go the Restaurant.

(move from asking what, for information, to why, for reasons; this may also be in indirect complaint)

April - Mrs. Reed I did not get my poem tapper back I can't find it either.

(indirect request - offers her an option)

In this section, we have seen that the journals show evidence of the acquisition of vocabulary, syntactic structures, and various ways of expressing a language function in the process of communicating over time. The daily writing provides a record for the teacher of student progress.

Dialogue journals allow learning to grow out of student interests

> The adult literacy process...implies the existence of two interrelated contexts. One is the context of authentic dialogue between learners and educators as equally knowing subjects. The second is the real, concrete context of facts, the social reality in which men exist. (Freire, p. 214)

Although Freire was primarily interested in adults acquiring literacy skills, his philosophy that learning must grow out of real issues applies as well to anyone learning a second language. We tend to learn better when we can associate the content to be learned with important issues in our own lives. But how can a teacher with 27 students design course content relevant to each student? The task is impossible. In dialogue journals, however, interests can be as varied as the students in the class and the teacher responds to each. Excerpts from the journals during one week in April give an idea of the diversity of interests that are possible. No teacher

could or would even want to address all of these interests and concerns in class. In the journals they can be explored at leisure.

Lisa - Do they know who are killing the kids. do they have suspects? I heard on the news that they think the person who is killing the kids goes to their funerals. I don't know if its true. (referring to the murders in Atlanta in 1981)

Douglas - Yesterday we were working on our social studies and we have some really good encyclopedias that Mr. ___ brought to the classroom so we can use. I am working on the crow. Mrs. Reed are the crows all black?

Nicky - What are you going to do for Easter vacation? Why is Easter celebrated?

Janny - Ever since we started school in January I have let myself fall apart. I never seemed to have enough time to do my homework or anything. I was messed up all the time too. From now on I am going to be ready for everything.

Jung An - Cheetahs are fast
as well as strong
but man is fast
as well as not strong
They are beutiful
and also trustful.

Ricardo - My grandmother died at the first. That why I haven't been concentrating. I am sorry about my grandmother dieing. I miss her. I am sorry that I didn't learn anything more because I was worried of my mother.

Sven - T Do you have plans for Spring Vacation? Will you go to visit your Dad?

S Probably not. I decided If he dosen't call my why should I call him. Should I call him or wait for him to call me. Signed: help!

If the students' interests, questions or problems are important enough to them, a lengthy discussion will follow, sometimes lasting all year long. In the process, language is used and learned. Space

here does not permit an example, but Staton (1982) and Kreeft (1982) have written on this subject elsewhere.

If Friere is right, that learning occurs in the context of real life issues, then some materials cannot be pre-prepared, but must grow out of the students' minds and experiences, to be addressed as they come up.

Dialogue journals allow the teacher to 'start where the student is'

Learner-centered instruction depends on the teacher's being able to assess the language competence of each student and build from that point, instead of starting at some pre-determined level of instruction. But this is very difficult when student competence in one classroom ranges from those who speak and write English almost natively to those who know no English and do not read and write in their own language. In the journals, Mrs. Reed accommodates to the level of each student. On the first day of class, we can already see some differences between the level of Bao's and Kemmy's writing and Mrs. Reed's responses:

Bao: What are we learning.
Today what P.E. is.
I like play Baceball.
Next week P.E is what.

T: We are learning of the longitude and latitude of our world. We are learning about Volcanoes. Today we looked at some lava. Did you see the rock float?
Today we were going to play relay races for P.E.
I don't know what next week's P.E. area will be.

Kemmy: Today we seLLing.
Today we science.
Today we orang good.

T: Kemmy is spelling 10 words.
Today Kemmy looked at two beans.

Kemmy saw a little plant!
Kemmy likes oranges!
Do you like apples, Kemmy?

Kemmy is from Vietnam and as far as Mrs. Reed knows, is not literate in Vietnamese. Kemmy starts the year by asking for words and copying them from cards. By March, the differences between Bao's and Kemmy's journals are dramatic.

Bao: I know I was saying the bad language. I will stop saying the bad language. I know why I get in trouble and I don't go out to play, I don't get in trouble. So I won't go out and play.
Today is friday 13 and it is bad luck day becuse we got report card, math test and spelling test. How come people said friday 13 is the bad luck day?

T: It is just an idea that people have! 13 is supposed to be a bad luck number and when it comes on Friday it is even more bad luck. Some people think Friday the thirteenth is good luck.
It is good for you to be out playing. It is very good for you to learn to control your temper and your tongue.

Kemmy: today we are doing spelling is good and today I am so happy and so funny...Mrs Reed sompob He have New journal and He so happy and Mrs Reed I have two journal I am have to...Andy He 3 journal.

T: Andy has his 3rd journal. Sompob has his 4th journal and Kemmy has his 2nd journal. You all are writing in your journal every day.
Today we had a spelling bee. Kemmy spelled words for us. It was fun. I am glad Kemmy is spelling.

In March, Kemmy is writing independently, using the words and structures that he knows and Mrs. Reed uses simple structures in response, even using his name to catch his attention so he will want to read what she has written. Meanwhile, she and Bao are reflecting on and working through an issue that they have written about many

times during the year, and they discuss a cultural point. In each journal, we see signs of language acquisition, but it does not occur at the same rate or even in the same way.

Through dialogue journals, teachers learn a great deal about their students

I have already discussed how in dialogue journals teachers can observe and assess the acquisition of English language forms and functions. But imagine the information that a teacher would have about people, languages, cultures, and customs, after writing to each of 27 students, each of 150 days during a school year! It is difficult to think of another situation in which such a rich exchange of information is possible. When asked what she got out of the journal writing, Mrs. Reed said:

> Oh, I'm learning, I'm learning, I'm learning! Especially with this culture I'm with now, with so many cultures, there's such richness. I'm learning every day about little nuances of social behavior and customs and cultures. I don't think I've ever grown so much in my life as I have this year in understanding the problems of different cultures, different races, trying to fit into this pattern of American life. I think I learned to respect other cultures. I've always been fascinated with and loved other cultures, but I think that I have learned to love and respect them more.

Conclusion

Previous research on dialogue journal writing with native English speakers has shown that the writing is student-generated and interactive, and closely resembles natural, face-to-face spoken communication (Staton, Shuy, Kreeft and Reed, 1982). As a result, the process of dialogue journal writing allows students learning a second language to learn in a manner very similar to the way that a first language is learned--by discovering the rules of language form and use in the context of real, learner-generated communication.

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